



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

THE DOGMA OF JOURNALISTIC INERRANCY.

BY MUNROE SMITH.

A YEAR or two ago a letter was printed on the first page of the New York "Sun" with the startling editorial head-line: "Right You Are; Wrong Were We." Those who read the letter discovered with a shade of disappointment that the mistake which the editor admitted was a trifling one: he had described a football as an "oblate spheroid." Still, his response made a grateful impression and lingered pleasantly in the memory; for admissions of editorial fallibility are most unusual, and the promptness, completeness and cheerfulness of this admission made it unique.

That newspapers rarely admit mistake is notorious. They are far from willing to correct statements of fact, and they are very unwilling to withdraw or modify expressions of editorial opinion. Many persons find this attitude unreasonable; some pronounce it absurd. Fundamentally, however, the policy of the newspapers is sound. It may even be shown to be necessary. It was not originally adopted because of any conviction that news was accurate and editorial opinion conclusive; on the contrary, it was forced upon the daily press by the inevitable inaccuracy of its news and the necessary inconclusiveness of its judgments.

News, of course, presents itself as matter of fact, but it is in reality only matter of impression. News of an occurrence reflects, at best, a one-sided superficial first view of a part of the facts which make up the occurrence. The difference between facts and news becomes most evident when we compare the methods by which facts are ascertained and those by which news is gathered. The most efficient agencies which the wit of man has devised for ascertaining facts are scientific investigation and judicial inquiry. Both agencies have found it necessary to develop special and highly technical processes and to take plenty of time—processes

which journalism could not employ if it would, and time which the journalist has not at his disposal.

A comparison between judicial inquiry and news-gathering is the more legitimate because the work of courts is in some respects akin to that of newspapers. Many matters which figure first as news become in time objects of judicial investigation. Courts disentangle their facts, as journals get their news, from testimony. Like news-gathering (and unlike scientific investigation) judicial inquiry is conducted under some limitation as regards time: except in police courts the work is not hurried, but controversies must be terminated and the calendar must be cleared. The methods of the news-gatherer, however, are very different from those employed by courts. The reporter, as a rule, hears but one side, and very little of the evidence on that side. He hears testimony which a court would exclude as irrelevant or misleading. He often relies wholly on hearsay. He does little if anything in the way of cross-questioning witnesses or determining their freedom from bias, and he seldom investigates their reputation for veracity. The crudity of his processes is attributable mainly to haste. Where courts have days or weeks, he has minutes or, at best, hours. The pace at which he must work is quickened by competition; for news is spoiled if a rival journal publishes it in an earlier edition. The correspondent labors under much the same difficulties as the local reporter, and has little more opportunity to test the statements which he transmits.

The difference between facts and news is increased, in many instances, by political or economic bias. A reporter hesitates to bring in matter which makes against the policy of his newspaper, and he is inclined so to color the matter which he does turn in as to render it acceptable.

The most important factor of variation, however, is the news-gatherer's duty to make a "story." This duty is not imposed upon him by arbitrary editorial policy; it is imposed upon the newspaper by the news-readers; and all that the editor decides is how far he shall go in meeting the public demand. Nor is the public desire for "true stories" a new desire created by the newspapers; it is as old as human society. Rumors about great people and great events, gossip and scandal about people of all sorts—these have always been demanded. And from the outset the gatherers and distributors of such news—village gossips, town

barbers, travelling peddlers and strolling bards—have been constrained to put their news into artistic form; they have gained a hearing not because their stories were true, but because their news was always a story.

The news-story must, of course, maintain a close connection with the world of fact. News, no matter how fictitious, deals with real persons in real places, and is usually based on actual occurrences. Pure fiction is the younger rival of news; it tries to tell a better story by freeing itself wholly from the trammels of fact. In so doing it gains in artistic quality, but it loses something of verisimilitude. Even in pure fiction an illusion of reality is essential to enjoyment; and news, because it preserves a nominal connection with fact, retains the advantage of readier and stronger illusion.

It seems a far cry from village gossips and wandering storytellers to the modern daily press, with its costly plants, its myriads of workers, its national and international organization; but, at bottom, modern journalism satisfies the same social demand with the same supply—rumor, scandal and gossip. Some of the more respectable newspapers limit their output of scandal; some of them refrain, except in the case of prominent people, from publishing gossip; a few endeavor to exclude unauthenticated rumors of the “interesting if true” type; but others cover the whole field and achieve thereby the largest sales. The modern daily press has unquestionably whetted the appetite for fiction that masquerades as fact, because it has made the supply as regular as that of our daily bread; and the demand that news shall be interesting has grown more urgent as the interest of news has been enhanced by increasing skill in its presentation. More strictly than ever before the news-gatherer is held to-day to the duty of making a story. If the occurrence which he has to describe is not interesting, he must supply interest. If the details do not group themselves dramatically, they must be regrouped. Omission or addition of incidents is governed, not by a desire to make the picture correct, but by the obligation to make it striking. To the journalism that gives freest play to the artistic impulse of imaginative reconstruction, we apply the term “sensational”; but it is not commonly realized that sensationalism is only an exaggeration of what we are accustomed to regard as legitimate journalistic practice, and that even in the most respectable news-

papers there is a great and inevitable difference between facts and news.

Editorial comments are based on current news. If, as is commonly the case, the news is inaccurate, the comments are necessarily inconclusive. And the editor, like the reporter, works under the lash of timeliness. It is expected of him that he shall emit opinions promptly. The function of the leading article is to relieve readers who are mentally indolent and readers who are busy and therefore preoccupied—and nearly all readers fall into one or the other of these classes—from the task of forming their own opinions or finding fit expression for their own emotions. This function must obviously be discharged before the readers have either made up their minds or forgotten the news. Once in a while, a very conscientious editor, confronted with a very difficult or a very important question, announces that the newspaper prefers to reserve its judgment until fuller reports are obtained; but even such an editor is rarely able to wait until all the relevant facts are approximately established. To reserve judgment is, on the whole, injudicious. It not only disappoints the reader of the editorial page, but it tends to discredit the snap judgments presented in adjacent columns. Bismarck's aphorism seems here in point: that it is often less dangerous to do the wrong thing than to do nothing.

Under such conditions, editorial utterances, if not dictated by partisanship or other prepossessions, are more often reflections suggested by the current news than anything approaching judgments, and more often expressions of emotion than exhibitions of thought. The editor's safest course is to voice what seems likely to be the general feeling of his readers. The most dangerous course that he can follow is to try to formulate a judgment.

The legal view of news and of newspaper comment—a view that is entitled to consideration—is clearly reflected in the care with which, in criminal cases, all such matter is withheld from the jurors.

If the preceding analysis of the functions of daily journalism is substantially correct, the general policy of newspapers is evident. With facts as such, they have nothing to do. Statements of fact concern them only when the matter is timely and the form interesting. The great metropolitan newspaper should steadily roll off from its cylindrical presses its endless picture of daily life,

having less regard for truth of line and of color than for general effect; never looking backward except to point out that on such a date it published "exclusively" some interesting piece of news. On its editorial page it should record the thoughts suggested and the feelings excited by the news of the day; never reverting to its past utterances except to remind its readers that on such a date it expressed an opinion which fuller information has confirmed.

The course of conduct here outlined is that which the ablest newspapers regularly follow; and they would doubtless follow it without exception, were it not for a factor of disturbance which is practically constant—the letter to the editor.

By tradition, and in consonance with certain established (although disputable) theories regarding the relation of newspapers to the public, every individual who alleges misrepresentation or misjudgment of his acts or utterances has a right to a modest amount of space in which to present his grievance and to ask for redress. This right is akin to the commoner's right of petition in a monarchic or aristocratic state, and it is correspondingly sacred. Such letters, if they be not too long, must be printed; they must be printed with scrupulous exactness; and, as a rule, they must be answered.

These petitions the newspaper is bound to resent and to resist. They intrude belated facts. They call upon the journalist to turn aside from his business of publishing the news and making comments on the news, and to go into the inconsistent business of publishing facts and rendering judgments based upon facts. To cater to such demands would be bad journalism. To make the situation perfectly clear, let us imagine that the newspapers received every such petition in a friendly spirit; that they investigated every alleged grievance in a judicial temper and with an open mind; that if, on full consideration, it did not appear that any misrepresentation had been made or any misjudgment recorded, they announced this finding in such a manner as to inflict upon the unsuccessful petitioner the least possible pain; that if, on the contrary, the grievance were found to be real, they granted prompt and full redress, corrected the erroneous statement, modified or withdrew the misjudgment, and made the correction, modification or withdrawal as prominent as the original item or comment. What would be the result? Every newspaper would be deluged with petitions. To deal with them, the working force

would have to be increased and the paper itself enlarged. To discharge its new duties fully and conscientiously, every important newspaper would probably be forced to organize a second staff, composed of men not primarily interested in news but in facts—men of judicial temper and scientific training; and it would probably be found desirable to issue with the daily newspaper a supplementary fact-paper. In the fact columns of this supplement the reader would find corrections, first, of yesterday's news; second, of day-before-yesterday's news; and so on back for weeks, for months, and possibly for years, for in some instances no satisfactory approximation to the truth could be attained until years had elapsed. On the editorial page of this fact-paper would appear the sober second thoughts of the fact editors, touching the opinions expressed weeks, months or years before by their colleagues in the news department.

This fantastic picture of a journalistic house divided against itself is of value as a further illustration of the difference between news and facts. It shows that a serious and persistent pursuit of facts would carry the journalist into the field of the historian. The picture is of chief value, however, as a demonstration that the demands of individuals for the correction of misstatements or for the withdrawal of misjudgments are unreasonable demands, which the newspapers are compelled to resist. Any considerable concessions to these demands would be distinctly injurious to the essential interests of journalism. In theory, such concessions would be admired by all who praise truth and justice; in practice, they would gratify only the comparatively small number of persons whose wrongs were righted, and they would displease almost all other newspaper readers. Frequent corrections of yesterday's news would annoy the news-reader by compelling him to doubt the news of to-day. The illusion of reality might in the end be so weakened as to rob news of the only advantage which it possesses over other forms of imaginative literature. Nor would the reader of newspaper comment be pleased by frequent modifications or reversals of the editorial attitude. The average man does not care to appropriate tentative conclusions; he wishes, for the sake of mental tranquillity, to be provided with judgments that seem final. To lose confidence in his newspaper would drive him to formulate his own prejudices and to find reasons for defending them; and this would be irksome.

The illusion of reality as regards its news and the illusion of finality as regards its opinions constitute what is commonly called the "prestige" of a newspaper. The word is apt, for its original meaning is "illusion." In eighteenth-century English it was used in no other sense; Johnson defined "prestiges" as "illusions, impostures, juggling tricks." To-day the word has come to suggest something like reputation, but it does not mean reputation: it implies nothing more than successful appeal to the imagination. Reputation for accuracy of statements no newspaper possesses; for every one knows that news is not accurate, and that the only difference between reckless and cautious journalism is in the degree of inaccuracy. Reputation for soundness of judgment no newspaper possesses; for every moderately intelligent person knows that snap judgments cannot be uniformly wise. Popular illusion on this point is more persistent only because the readers of each newspaper share its views; they read it because it voices their prejudices; but for this very reason no general illusion obtains as to the wisdom of any particular paper. "Prestige" in these matters newspapers do possess in varying degrees; and the statement that "a newspaper must preserve its prestige" is axiomatic. The maintenance of illusions which are dear to the public and useful to the newspapers is a necessary aim of journalism; and the newspaper is bound to save what an Oriental would call its "face."

If it be admitted—and it is hard to see how it can be denied—that the petition for justice is a disturbing factor in the life of a newspaper, it must be conceded that sound journalistic policy demands that such disturbances be reduced to a minimum. It follows that the petition must be so answered that the petitioner shall not be likely to repeat his offence. No satisfaction is to be given him, for that would encourage him to write again as soon as any of his acts or utterances should again become an item of news or a subject of comment. Moreover, any satisfaction given him would encourage other aggrieved persons to write to the editor. It is clear, therefore, that, even if the petitioner happens to be in the right, he must be so answered as to be put in the wrong. This is not difficult to any practised disputant, and to an editor it is particularly easy. Both for the special purpose of putting the petitioner in the wrong and for the general and really essential purpose of withholding satisfaction, the editor has

means at his disposal which the ordinary disputant does not command. Not only has he the defensive position and the last word, but the attack is necessarily made on ground which he selects and with weapons which he furnishes. He decides in what part of his paper and in what type the letter shall be printed. If it contain arguments which seem convincing, or if it be so written as to appeal strongly to the sympathy of the public, he can print it in a part of the paper where few readers will notice it. He always puts it into the smallest type. He selects the heading for the letter, and is thus enabled to give a false impression of its contents to those who do not read it, and to bias the minds of those who do. The heading and the answer—if any other answer than the heading be deemed necessary—are printed in larger type, the heading usually in heavy-face type. This difference in type fitly symbolizes the fundamental advantage of the editorial position. The attack upon the paper is made by the weak individual “I”; the defence is conducted by the strong institutional “We.” Were not vital interests of journalism at stake, the inequality of the contest might well move editors themselves to compassion.

To most American editors the denial of petitions for justice seems insufficient. They are clearly of the opinion that petitioners not only must receive no satisfaction, but should be punished for the attempt to interfere with the regular business of the newspaper. This attitude is intelligible, but it is not prudent. If the newspapers are adequately protected by making petitions fruitless—and this seems to be the case—it is unnecessary, and therefore impolitic, to give petitioners an additional grievance. Passive hopelessness should not be converted into active hatred. In any case, there is a choice among punishments; and it may be asserted with confidence that no form of punishment should be selected which tends to arouse sympathy for the petitioner. If it be deemed necessary to punish him at all, the safer course is to make him ridiculous.

The refusal of satisfaction is of course necessary; and this involves refusal to admit mistakes. This, in its turn, involves an assumption that mistakes are not made; and this assumption is the Doctrine of Journalistic Inerrancy. It is obviously a fiction; but, like many fictions of the law, it furnishes a convenient statement of a working rule. It formulates a policy based on expediency, and it admits such exceptions as expediency may require.

It is well known that doctrines expressing policies tend to harden into dogmas presented as truths. With this tendency every student of government or of law or of religion is familiar. To this peril journalism also has succumbed. The Dogma of Journalistic Inerrancy converts a maxim of policy into a tenet of faith. It asserts that the newspaper is always right; and from this premise it deduces invariable rules of journalistic conduct. To show how this result has been reached, it is necessary to consider the manner in which the peculiar nature of journalistic activity, especially its preoccupation with first impressions to the exclusion of facts and with sentiment to the exclusion of judgment, reacts upon the minds of the journalists themselves.

Journalists of the highest mental type develop a philosophy which is by no means unknown outside of their profession. They hold that truth is not ascertainable, and that, if it could be ascertained, it would probably be valueless. Applied to journalistic problems this theory produces very convenient inferences. Since the facts which constitute an occurrence can never be fully ascertained, one view of the occurrence is presumably as good as another. The first impression may indeed be modified by a second, but the second in turn may be modified by a third; and in many cases, after long investigation, the first impression is re-established. As for editorial opinions, they are probably sounder and assuredly not less sound than other opinions. The only value of opinions, in any case, is the influence which they exercise upon conduct; and if an editorial opinion makes for desirable conduct, it is better than a more deliberate judgment which may have undesirable results. It follows that there is really no reason why any plausible statement should be corrected or any laudable opinion modified.

Among journalists of another and inferior mental type, a conviction develops that the news which they publish is fairly accurate, and that the views which they take are the only correct ones. The fact that their statements are seldom denied and their opinions seldom disputed, the ease with which the few who attempt to correct them are discomfited, the apologies and flatteries with which the experienced letter-writer approaches them—these things tend to create and to strengthen self-esteem. They forget that their comparative immunity from criticism is due to hopelessness, and that the deference shown them is evoked by fear.

The conviction of their own truthfulness and wisdom is of course most rapidly and most strongly developed among the most respectable journalists. The newspaper that is able to give thanks in public that it is not as other journals are—forgers of rumors, scandalmongers, “yellow”—develops a spiritual pride which darkens its judgment; and its relative accuracy and wisdom seem to it almost or altogether absolute.

Among all newspaper men the transformation of the doctrine of inerrancy into a dogma is furthered by constant association with one another, and by the resulting formation of a general journalistic opinion which is incomparably stronger and more uncompromising than is the opinion of any individual journalist. The same influences produce like results in all compact, like-minded social groups—in cliques and in parties, in faculties and in churches. Loyalty to the group makes the interests of the group paramount and converts the rules of conduct which subserve these interests into articles of faith. If one may invert Schiller’s famous distich, the good cow which provides its attendants with butter becomes to them a goddess, gracious and holy.

Between the acceptance of the doctrine of inerrancy as a statement of policy, with clear consciousness that it is a fiction, and assent to the dogma, with conviction that it embodies a truth, many mental attitudes are conceivable; and it is probable that most newspaper men occupy intermediate positions; but the general conduct of the American daily press shows that the average editor stands much nearer to the dogmatic than to the rational point of view.

The dogmatic attitude reveals itself primarily in unbroken adherence to the rule that mistake is not to be conceded. It is only by journalists of the rational type that admission of error is ever made. Even from them such admissions come seldom, and the mistakes which they acknowledge are hardly ever of any importance.

The degree to which the dogmatic attitude has been substituted for the rational is reflected in the treatment of letter-writers who ask for an editorial correction or retraction. To journalists of the agnostic and indifferentist type, the aggrieved individual who forces his way into their columns is a fussy little man whose grievance is of no real consequence. Of course, no satisfaction is to be given him, but it is unnecessary to take him seriously

or to treat him very badly. Such journalists defend themselves with the weapons of wit and of humor, in the use of which they naturally excel. To the thoroughgoing dogmatist, on the other hand, the outsider who denies journalistic inerrancy is a miscreant, who is to be punished, not merely for the general purpose of repressing infidelity, but also because of his personal sin against the light. The journalist of the self-righteous type is peculiarly vindictive in his treatment of such offenders. What does it profit him that he is scrupulous beyond others, if he is to be reproved as are the publicans of the press? These journalists are not happy in the use of humor or of wit; for the humor of an earnest man is heavy and the wit of an angry man is blunt. Outsiders who question the opinions of an editor of this type in matters of any consequence are often treated with unwise brutality. They are trampled and gored by the Sacred Cow.

Dogmas are dangerous, not only to those who deny them, but also to those who accept them. Policy admits variations; dogma excludes them. Sound journalistic policy demands that the disturbance of newspaper business by petitions be reduced to a minimum; but the interests of journalism also require that petitions be occasionally submitted. Newspapers, like governments, are bound to do things that arouse resentment; resentment must have an outlet; and for newspapers, as for monarchic and oligarchic governments, the safest outlet is by petition. If petitions should cease, the public would clearly perceive that its right of petition had been nullified. It is for this reason that it seems unwise to inflict punishment on petitioners. The aim of punishment goes beyond the discouragement of offenders; it goes to the total repression of offences. It may, indeed, be said that the repressive aim of punishment is never fully realized; it may be urged that, for the sake of bringing to public attention the facts as they view them, some aggrieved persons will always brave certain ridicule and probable insult; but it must be recognized that the tendency of punishment is to reduce petitions below the minimum of safety to journalism itself.

The dogmatic attitude and the course of conduct which it dictates are directly dangerous to journalism by reason of the resentment which they arouse. In primitive social conditions those who insult and defame others incur bodily danger; and in some parts of our country the journalist is still exposed to private ven-

geance. As civilization advances, the person who injures another by spoken, written or printed words is protected against violent reprisals; but this is not done for his sake, nor does the law which protects him represent any social solicitude for his life or limbs. The law is concerned solely with the maintenance of the peace. The persistent social attitude was clearly expressed by Franklin—himself a journalist—when he intimated that complete liberty of the press should logically be accompanied by complete liberty of the cudgel. The law has deprived the public of its cudgels, but in exchange it has given actions for defamation and prosecutions for libel. The check upon journalistic activity persists; it has simply assumed a new form. Journalists gain something by the change. The legal remedy is more costly in money and in time than the private vengeance which it replaces, and it is less certain in its operation. Moreover, the law is conservative; and new forms of insult, which in primitive society would have found redress by the cudgel, are only slowly met by an extension of the established legal remedies. But the advantages which journalism enjoys in the present stage of legal development are not necessarily permanent. More effective enforcement of the remedies which the law provides may be secured by associated effort. Societies might well be formed which for a moderate annual premium would insure their members against defamation. Able counsel would be retained; every grievance alleged by a member would be promptly investigated; and, whenever sufficient ground for action should be discovered, legal proceedings would be instituted and carried through at the cost of the society. Once formed, such organizations would probably extend their field of operations; they would become associations for the reform of the law. Doubtful cases would be brought before the courts in the hope of securing a judicial construction of the law more favorable to the protection of the individual reputation. Efforts would be made to obtain statutory changes of similar tendency. The laws of other countries would be examined, and it would be ascertained that in many respects these give more efficient protection against misrepresentation than is afforded by the laws now in force in our States. It would be found in particular that most foreign legislations do not require allegation and proof of pecuniary damage, but only of such misrepresentation as affects the reputation. In some legislations it is provided that, whenever a newspaper has been

guilty of misrepresentation, it must publish the full text of the judgment in the same part of the paper and in the same size of type in which the original misrepresentation appeared. Statutes of this character would be demanded, and in the present state of public feeling such statutes might be passed. Encouraged by success, the protective associations might press for legislative recognition of the right of privacy; and they might secure the adoption of laws penalizing the publication of statements regarding private and family life, except in cases in which written authorization could be shown or a legitimate public interest demonstrated. In our States it is notoriously easy for an organized minority to secure almost any sort of legislation; and it is evident that the libel-insurance societies would take care that the new laws should not sleep in the statute-books.

It need hardly be pointed out that such laws, effectively enforced, would seriously interfere with the existing liberty of the press. Journals would still appear, but they would bear little resemblance to the American newspapers of the present day. They would rather resemble those staid journals of Continental Europe, which the American newspaper man has always derided for lack of enterprise and dearth of interesting news. Journalists there would be, but of a new and humdrum type. They would lack the glad freedom in the exercise of irresponsible power which now makes the career of the American newspaper man attractive.

To most American journalists the dangers here indicated will probably seem unreal. Accustomed to arousing resentment and skilled in making its outbursts appear ridiculous, they naturally underrate the forces which they are arraying against themselves. They forget that the misrepresented, weak as individuals, may become strong through organization. They do not appreciate that the irritation of the misrepresented is rapidly increasing, partly because grievances are never redressed, but chiefly because petitions for redress are so frequently dismissed with frivolity or with brutality. Least of all do they appreciate that the perilous course which they are following is due to a gradual change in their own mental attitude—to the elevation of the doctrine of journalistic inerrancy to the position of a dogma.

Gossips and scandalmongers have always been feared; bards were formerly feasted in the halls of heroes whose deeds they were

expected to celebrate, and welcomed in the courts of princes whose acts they might condemn; but the power of the modern daily press is, in its magnitude, a new thing. Like all new power, it is overconfident; it does not realize its limitations, foresee its perils, nor discern the policy which it should pursue to minimize or neutralize hostility. It might well learn something from the history of political power; and it might consider with especial profit some of the many wise things which Machiavelli says about the absolute prince.

The prince, Machiavelli argues, cannot safely be virtuous, for of the recognized virtues many would impede his career and some would destroy it. But, inasmuch as men praise virtue and censure vice, the prince should always seem virtuous. To this end, he should always claim for himself the moral qualities which as a rule he cannot display in his conduct. This, however, is not enough; he must occasionally do conspicuously virtuous acts. The occasions should be carefully selected, so that his good deeds shall involve the least possible sacrifice of political interest and make the greatest possible impression upon the public imagination.

Up to a certain point, newspapers instinctively follow the course which Machiavelli mapped out for the prince. They cannot be accurate, but they claim accuracy; they cannot render unbiased, deliberate and conclusive judgments, but they assert that their comments possess these qualities; they cannot deal justly with petitions for the redress of grievances, but they say that they are just. Obviously they should go further. In rejecting petitions, they should assume an appearance of fairness; and once in a while they should grant redress of a grievance, and grant it in such a manner as to make the act of justice especially striking. Once in a while a letter protesting against misrepresentation should be followed by the curt editorial statement: "The reporter who misled us has been discharged." More rarely, but still once in a while, a newspaper should relieve an individual from an aspersion cast upon him in its editorial comment; and, since he who gives quickly gives twice and he who gives cheerfully gives twentyfold, the aspersion should be retracted at the earliest possible moment and with the ungrudging alacrity of the "Sun's" confession: "Right You Are; Wrong Were We."

The dismissal of a reporter for misrepresentation is not wholly

without precedent; but the cases in which such action has been publicly announced are very rare. In such dismissals, undue consideration has possibly been given by some editors to the question of the reporter's culpability. Private dismissals, except for offences against the newspaper itself, and consideration of the reporter's culpability as regards outsiders are equally inconsistent with sound newspaper policy. A reporter who has turned in a good story should never be dismissed because his story is not true, but only because the interests of the newspaper require a vicarious sacrifice on the altar of justice; and, since such sacrifices are designed to allay resentment and to create a general illusion of journalistic truthfulness and justice, they should be made with the utmost publicity.

The prompt, undisguised and cheerful withdrawal of an editorial aspersion is probably without precedent. The editor who should first take such a step would doubtless be censured by almost all other journalists, but their opinions would not appear in print. In the public mind, the truthfulness and justice of his paper would be so securely established that subsequent rigorous adherence to normal journalistic policy would not seriously impair this new prestige for many years. Upon the advertising value of action so unusual it is unnecessary to insist.

A second editorial retraction could not produce the same sensation as the first, and repeated dismissals of reporters would also yield diminishing returns of illusion; but since such departures from established custom could never become common, they would never fail to produce the desired effect. An annual dismissal or a triennial retraction, if properly staged, would cause the murmurs of discontented thousands to pass unheeded.

These suggestions will doubtless be regarded as revolutionary, but they are in reality conservative. Occasional departures from the traditional policy not only will be of advantage to journalism, but are necessary for its safety. The Doctrine of Journalistic Inerrancy must of course be maintained, but the Dogma should be abandoned.

MUNROE SMITH.